Tides of the Heart

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Chapter 1: The Anchor

Belen's studio was a sacred sanctuary, woven with the whispers of unspoken vows and tender dreams. The air thrummed with the sharp tang of turpentine and the sea's salty embrace, its ceaseless murmurs slipping through the cracked window like a lover's breath. Every wall blossomed with sketches—Jhon's hands, strong and fervent, cradling a microphone; his silhouette bathed in the golden glow of stage lights; his eyes, once ablaze with passion, now shadowed by a haunting weariness. She painted him tirelessly, even when his gaze drifted from hers, even when his band's collapse left him pacing their tiny apartment, a wild heart caged in despair.

"I'm your forever, Jhon," she murmured one moonlit night, her forehead pressed to his, feeling the tremor of his soul beneath whiskey-soaked breaths. His kiss was a tempest—fierce, desperate, as if her love alone could stitch together the fragments of the boy he'd been at 19, when their worlds collided at *The Mariner's Cry*, a gritty dive bar where his voice first wove enchantment. Back then, his songs were molten honey, his dreams a blazing inferno. *"We'll conquer the world, my love,"* he'd sworn, his fingers tracing her collarbone with reverence. *"You'll paint the skies, I'll sing the stars. Together, we'll be eternal."*

But his fire burned too fiercely, consuming all it touched. The band's debut album crumbled, a dream reduced to ash. His bandmates drifted away, leaving Jhon to clutch at the shards of his pride. Belen became his sanctuary, his muse, his unwavering lighthouse. She sold her vibrant landscapes to wide-eyed tourists to cover his rent when shame kept him from the landlord's door. She held him through the agonizing shudders of withdrawal, his body betraying him as he traded whiskey for pills.

The town watched, their eyes heavy with pity and whispers of judgment. At *The Salty Mermaid*, fishermen grumbled about Jhon's "city-boy fragility." Mrs. Lowell, the baker with kind eyes, pressed warm cinnamon rolls into Belen's hands, her voice soft with sorrow: *"Love shouldn't carve such wounds, darling."* Yet Belen clung to the memory of her Jhon—the boy who'd strummed a battered guitar under starlight, whose love had etched their initials into the weathered lighthouse, a promise carved in time.

One stormy evening, Jhon stumbled into her studio, his eyes wild with anguish. *"They've abandoned me,"* he choked, collapsing onto the paint-streaked sofa. *"The label, the band... even Rick, my drummer, my brother."* His laugh was a jagged wound. *"I'm no phoenix, Belen.*

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I'm just... wreckage."

Belen knelt beside him, her heart breaking as her fingers grazed the phoenix tattoo on his forearm, its wings as fierce and fractured as his spirit. *"You're not wreckage,"* she whispered, her voice a tender vow. *"You're my lost star, waiting to shine again."*

"Why do you stay?" he pleaded, his grip on her wrist a desperate anchor. *"I'm a sinking ship, my love. Save yourself."*

Her heart flinched, but her love held firm. *"I stay because I promised you my heart. You. Us. Forever."*

"There is no 'us'!" he roared, his pain erupting as he hurled a sketchbook across the room. It crashed against the wall, pages fluttering like broken wings. *"There's only me—shattering, dragging you down with me."*

She didn't chase him as he fled. Instead, she gazed at her reflection in the studio's grimy window—a woman whose edges had softened, her once-radiant hues dulled to ash. That night, she dreamt of Mara, her grandmother, standing on the shore, silver hair entwined with seaweed. *"You've mistaken love for sacrifice, my child,"* Mara said, her voice the mournful creak of tide-worn wood. *"A heart can only hold so much saltwater before it forgets its own rhythm."*

Belen woke, breathless, the sea's bitter taste lingering on her lips.

Chapter 2: The Storm

The tabloid photo struck like a dagger to her heart.

Belen found it slipped between the café's sugar packets—Jhon, bathed in garish neon, leaning into a woman with lips as red as betrayal. His arm encircled her, a gesture of surrender that tore at Belen's soul. The headline sneered: *"Fallen Star's New Flame?"*

Her hands trembled as she dialed his number, her voice barely a whisper. *"Who is she, Jhon?"*

"No one," he snapped, his tone sharp with defensiveness. *"A fan, a fleeting moment. God, Belen, it's not like we're—"*

"Promised to each other?" she cut in, her voice fragile as glass. The word hung heavy, piercing as the locket she still wore—a delicate ship trapped in crystal, his vow from three winters past. *"You asked me to be yours forever. Was I 'no one' too?"*

Silence stretched, then a bitter laugh sliced through. *"You've chained me with that promise for years. 'Stay, Jhon. Fight, Jhon.' I'm exhausted, Belen. Exhausted by your saintly devotion, by... us."*

The line went dead, leaving her heart in ruins.

Belen stood frozen, the café's hum fading to a hollow drone. Mrs. Lowell's gentle hand grazed

her shoulder. *"Sit, my dear. Let me brew you some tea."*
"No," Belen breathed, her voice a ghost. *"I need the sky."*
She ran, the cliffs rising before her, the wind howling like a heartbroken wail. Rain stung her skin as she tore at the locket, its chain snapping with a cry of metal and memory. *"You swore to me,"* she sobbed, casting it into the abyss. The sea claimed it with ravenous hunger.
Jhon found her at dawn, curled beneath the lighthouse, her body still, her warmth stolen by the night. *"Belen,"* he whispered, his voice breaking as he reached for her.
"Don't," she murmured, her words faint as mist. *"Was I just a melody to you? A verse you could discard?"*
He flinched, his face a map of regret. *"You think I chose this? To become... this?"* He gestured to himself—unkempt, eyes bloodshot, reeking of failure. *"I'm shattered, Belen. You can't piece me back together."*
"I wasn't trying to mend you," she said, her voice softer than the tide's caress. *"I was trying to love you with every breath. But you... you shut me out."*
He tried to speak, then faltered, turning away. *"Where are you going?"* she asked, though her heart already knew.
"Away," he said, his back to her. *"Before I drown you too."*
As he vanished, the storm unleashed its fury. Belen watched the waves devour the shore, her tears merging with the rain, a silent elegy for their love.

Chapter 3: The Hollow
The studio became a crypt, heavy with the ghosts of their love.
Belen's sketches faded, Jhon's once-dazzling smile buried beneath dust and time. She slept on the cold floor, wrapped in a blanket stained with paint and memories, Mara's voice haunting her dreams. *"You've entombed yourself in his ruins, my child. But graves are no place for a heart to live."*
One midnight, she pulled Mara's cedar chest from the shadows. Inside was her grandmother's journal, its pages fragile with salt and secrets. Mara's elegant script sang of love and loss:
"October 12, 1965: Another night lost to arguments with Thom. He calls my paintings 'unseemly'—too vivid, too bold. I told him my art is my soul's reckoning, not a trinket. He stormed to the docks. I believe he'll return. But if he doesn't... will I still paint? Or will I fade into his shadow?"
"November 3, 1965: Thom came back, his apologies soft. I forgave him. But tonight, I hid my newest canvas. Just in case."
Belen's fingers lingered on the words, her throat tight with recognition.

The next entry pierced her:
"March 18, 1972: He's gone. Took his boots, his anger. The house breathes easier. I hung my paintings in the window, bold and unapologetic. Let the town whisper. Let their judgments burn."
A knock broke her reverie. Finn stood on the porch, his work shirt streaked with varnish, holding the locket. *"Caught it in my nets,"* he said, his voice rough like driftwood, warm like embers. *"Felt like it belonged to you."*
She gazed at the glass orb, the tiny ship still pointing north, steadfast as her heart. *"Why?"*
He shrugged, his eyes kind. *"It felt like a piece of your soul."*
She invited him in, and they sat in quiet communion, Finn's calloused hands cradling a chipped mug. *"You build boats,"* she said, her voice tentative, seeking connection.
"Mostly mend them," he replied.
"Why?"
His gaze met hers, steady and true. *"Same reason you paint, I reckon. To prove broken things can still find the sea."*
Her breath caught, a spark of warmth piercing the hollow in her chest. Finn left silently, but his presence lingered, a gentle tide soothing her aching heart.

Chapter 4: The Tide
The shelter children dubbed her "the Art Ghost," their nickname laced with affection. Belen volunteered on Tuesdays, sketching as they climbed into her lap, their laughter a fragile melody woven with the pain of broken homes. Leo, a boy whose father was claimed by the sea, drew stormy skies with jagged edges. *"Make it fierce,"* he urged as Belen shaded his thunderclouds.
"Why fierce?"
"The ocean lies," he muttered. *"Promises safety, then swallows you whole."*
Finn began appearing at the shelter, bringing scraps of wood for the children. He'd linger in the doorway, watching Belen transform their anger into art, his quiet presence a steady anchor. One afternoon, he led her to his workshop, a barn alive with the scent of sawdust and half-built dreams. *"This one's for you,"* he said, nodding to a graceful skiff. *"If you'll have her."*
"Why?" she asked, her heart fluttering.
"Your eyes hold the sea," he said, his voice soft but certain. *"They're meant for endless horizons."*
Jhon returned on a crisp autumn day, standing on her porch, thin but sober, his hands buried in worn pockets. *"I'm clean,"* he said, his voice raw with hope. *"Two months. I want us again,*

Belen.”

She studied him—the boy who’d stolen her heart, the man who’d broken it. *“I can’t be your anchor anymore, Jhon,”* she said, her voice steady but laced with sorrow.

“Then let me be yours,” he begged, his eyes pleading. *“I’ll stay. I’ll fight for us.”*

“No,” she said, her heart resolute. *“You don’t get to pull me under again.”*

He left, his silhouette fading into the wind. Finn found her later, gazing at the locket, its ship still pointing north. *“You alright?”*

“Not yet,” she confessed, her voice trembling. *“But I will be.”*

Chapter 5: The Mirror

Jhon’s bus ticket read *“Nowhere, USA.”*

He’d plummeted to rock bottom in a Portland motel, retching regret and shame. Sobriety felt like a betrayal—of the fans who’d forgotten him, of the woman whose heart he’d shattered. One rain-soaked night, he wandered into a gallery, drawn by a poster: *Phoenix Hearts: Fragments & Flight – Belen Voss*.

Her art unraveled him.

A sculpture of guitar strings twisted into a ribcage, pulsing with loss. A painting of the locket dissolving into a flock of starlings, soaring free. And the heart of it—a charcoal triptych, *“The Three Faces of Us”*:

1. **The Boy**: Jhon at 19, radiant with hope and pride.
2. **The Storm**: A shadow tearing through a woman’s form, claws of betrayal.
3. **The Ghost**: Empty hands grasping at ashes.

He stumbled to a payphone, dialing her number with shaking hands. *“Your exhibit… it’s… I’m so sorry, Belen…”*

“Don’t,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. *“This is my story now.”*

Later, he poured his heart into a letter, ink blurred with whiskey and tears:

“You were right, my love. I didn’t know how to receive your heart. I thought love was the roar of a crowd, fleeting and loud. You gave me stillness, roots, a home. I was too afraid to grow into it.

I’m so sorry.

(It’s too late, I know.)

-J”

He left it unsigned, the paper melting in the rain.

Chapter 6: The Bloom

The gallery glowed with champagne’s sparkle and hushed reverence. Belen wore Mara’s

pearl earrings and a dress dyed with squid ink, its hem dancing like storm clouds. Finn stood quietly in the back, salt dusting his boots, his presence a steady warmth.

A critic approached, eyes alight. *"Your work—it's raw, redemptive. What's your secret?"*

Belen's gaze found Finn's. *"I learned to choose life over mere survival."*

At dawn, he guided her to the docks. The skiff—*Mara*—shimmered in the soft light. *"She's yours,"* he said. *"For when your heart's ready."*

"What if it's not?" she whispered, fear and hope entwined.

He pressed the locket-compass into her hand, his touch a quiet promise. *"The sea knows your path. So do you."*

They sailed toward the rising sun, the horizon ablaze with gold. Belen's laughter rang out, free and radiant, a song of rebirth. Mara's final words echoed in her soul:

"A woman who claims herself is a universe reborn."

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Years later, a postcard arrived at the studio.

"Belen—

I saw your mural in Manila. You turned our locket into a compass.

It's beautiful.

I'm sober now. Not for you, but for me.

Still learning what that means.

-J"

Belen pinned it beside Mara's journal, a quiet nod to the past. That night, she sketched a new vision: a phoenix, not rising from flames, but *swimming*—its wings embracing the ocean's depths, its eyes blazing with a radiant truth:

Some hearts are destined to sink.

And some...

Some learn to breathe beneath the waves.

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